

Learning from Loss

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Lessons from Our Gurus

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 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2022

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PISBN: 9789393986375

EISBN: 9789393986382

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Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by
R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

*To the storytellers of India who continue to
enchant and inspire*

*I see myself as joined to their tradition, particularly to the
free-ranging and interpretative oral tradition of Harikatha, or
devotional discourse, popular in many Indian languages.*

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Introduction

Grief comes in many guises and puts us on a painful personal journey that we must walk alone. There are many sentimental and philosophical sayings about loss and grief, but there is no getting around the fact that it hurts. Grief leaves us in tears, shed or unshed, and robs us of sleep and laughter. It can discourage us so much that we are unable to function normally. Learning from loss is a slow struggle. Different people react in different ways and take their own time to deal with it.

Indeed, we are frequently told that time heals, but not how long it takes. That seems to depend on our individual sadhana, or emotional practice. There are no rules, nor is it in the least dishonourable to grieve. Being human, we cannot help but mourn our loss. But beyond the dark shadow of grief lies the golden calm of peace if we let our hearts and minds take us forward into it.

Our Indian stories have a great deal to offer us on coping with loss and grief. In my view, the epics and the lives and parables of saints and sages are principally about

anger management and recovery from loss. They are like an illustrative textbook on response options. Somebody loses a loved one, somebody loses his honour, somebody feels abandoned by fate and deserted by luck. In selecting these stories, I looked for a variety of causes and responses across time and space from classical Hindu, Buddhist and Bhakti traditions. These stories touched a deep chord in me as I hope they will in you. I wish each one of us success in our personal journeys.

1

Living with Loss

How do you live with the loss of your loved ones, one after the other? This ancient story of Devahuti's brave effort to cope is found in the early chapters of the Bhagavata Purana or Srimad Bhagavatam, one of the holiest books in the Hindu tradition, at par with the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Bhagavatam is important to all three major schools of Hindu philosophy, Advaita, Vishishta-Advaita and Dvaita. Attributed to Veda Vyasa, it is said to have been composed after the Mahabharata and was imparted to King Parikshit in the last week of his life by Shuka, Vyasa's son.

'You must choose the colours you like for your trousseau,' said Shatarupa to her daughter Devahuti, turning over a

heap of silks. 'There is nothing that your father cannot get for you.'

'But mother, you are marrying me to a hermit. Will I need such clothes in his ashram?'

'Devahuti, you chose him yourself. These clothes will only add to your beauty as a bride. Don't refuse me,' said Shatarupa with a note of anxiety creeping in, for Devahuti was every bit as determined and passionate in her convictions as her father, Manu, the lord of the earthly world.

'Very well!' said Devahuti in laughing submission and began to put aside shades of blue silk that would set off her own deep blue eyes. Delicately built, with long black hair, she wondered what her husband-to-be actually looked like.

Devahuti had never set eyes on him. But Narada, the wandering sage, who went about the three worlds minding everybody's business, had often told her about the bright young hermit, Kardama, who lived by the banks of the holy river Sarasvati. According to Narada, Kardama was muscular, strong and handsome, besides being endowed with a ferocious intellect. 'He is a lion of a man,' declared Narada. 'I am almost afraid to visit him because he glows with such lustre that I fear my eyes will dim.'

Devahuti's interest had been fairly caught and she found herself wondering more and more about Kardama. When her parents told her that they wanted to get her married, she said boldly that she would like to marry Kardama.

A curious thing had then come to pass. Kardama – who had completed his days as a student and now lived alone in

his hut by the river – lost in meditation, had prayed to Lord Narayana, the Almighty. ‘Please find me a suitable wife, Lord,’ he had prayed. ‘I wish to move to the next stage of life as a householder, and once I complete that duty, I wish to take sanyas and think only of you, with total concentration.’

Lord Narayana was very pleased with Kardama’s resolute aim and told him in a dream that Devahuti, a daughter of Manu and Shatarupa, king and queen of the world, would be his bride.

He also informed Manu, in a dream, that it was his wish that Devahuti should marry Kardama, a son, like Manu, of Lord Brahma. Thus, Devahuti’s marriage was made in heaven itself, and in two days, she would be taken to Kardama by her parents.



As Kardama sat by the rippling Sarasvati, he saw the royal procession approaching his hut and went to greet it. Devahuti and Kardama looked at each other, and it’s safe to say that they fell instantly in love. Kardama was as manly and handsome as Sage Narada had described, and Devahuti looked like Mahalakshmi incarnate in her silk-clad beauty with pearls and flowers woven in her hair. Nevertheless, Kardama had reservations.

‘O king! You are a great and just ruler of whom everyone speaks well. You are the son of Lord Brahma himself, who created this world and all mankind. You are wealthy like

no other. How will the princess cope with my simple, hard existence and all the fasts and austerities that my wife will have to undertake as part of my religious life?’

‘She has chosen you herself, and Lord Narayana himself has promised her to you,’ said Manu, embarrassed by Kardama’s praise.

‘I have another point to raise. I prayed to Lord Narayana to find me a suitable wife, but I also said I would leave the householder’s life after my children were born. Will the princess accept this? Will you?’

Devahuti looked again at Kardama, and before she knew it, her head nodded. Her parents’ consent was a mere formality after that determined nod.

Devahuti and Kardama were married without further ado around the fire, and Lord Brahma himself came by to bless his son and granddaughter.

After her parents left her to her new life as Kardama’s wife, Devahuti’s first move was to tidily put away her bridal finery and dress herself in the simple garments suited to forest life.



Years passed by with Devahuti serving Kardama, as Parvati did Shiva, during his meditation. One day, as Devahuti approached him carrying a pot of water from the river with her customary cheerful smile, Kardama took a good look at her. Where had his fairy-tale bride vanished without a

sound of protest? Devahuti's limbs had grown painfully thin because of her never-ending austerities. Her long hair was twisted into a severe, practical knot. Her blue eyes had dimmed in lustre from years of fasting. Her face looked pinched although it smiled as sweetly as it had that first morning. She had long ago given away all her finery to visitors and villagers and was dressed in coarse, plain cloth.

'Dear wife, we have been lost in my austerities, have we not? But I never heard you complain,' said Kardama tenderly. 'Is there anything I can do to please you?'

'I would like to have children', said Devahuti in her direct, straightforward way, her spirit undimmed by her choice to live the hard life. A vague sense of unease crossed her mind at that moment but she could not think why and smiled instead at Kardama, who looked steadily back at her.

'Why don't you put that pot down and bathe in the river? I will wait for you,' said Kardama gently at last.

Devahuti did so, and as she emerged she was greatly astonished by the change in her. Her skin felt smooth and tight, her limbs were shapely and rounded, her rustic garments had changed to silk, and her hair flowed long and silken to her knees as before.

Devahuti understood, at once, that it was Kardama's yogic power that had wrought the transformation. At the door of their hut stood a magic chariot with wings, a vimana, and Kardama, looking fresh, young and handsome, stood by it, holding out his hand. Devahuti happily put her hand in his.

A long, enchanted honeymoon followed, and nine

beautiful daughters were born to them over the years. Devahuti revelled in being a mother, and Kardama was a loving, liberal father who taught his girls to read and write. Both parents taught them the life skills needed in an ashram, from collecting food to cooking it, from fetching wood to making fires, from drawing water to weaving mats and growing flowers for worship. They were a large, happy family living peacefully by the banks of the Sarasvati without a care in the world.

But one day, Lord Brahma came to visit along with nine tough young hermits, each with rippling muscles, a body hardened to iron by austerities and a broad forehead glowing with intelligence. 'My children, you are an exemplary family,' he said to Kardama and Devahuti. 'You have led clean, good lives and your daughters have been raised to be intelligent and good-natured. Marry them now to these bridegrooms of my choice so that they may go out and found their own families.'

Devahuti and Kardama did not wish to be parted from their daughters. But the world was young then, and they did not know many people for there were not that many people inhabiting the land those days. Accepting Lord Brahma's grandfatherly interest, they made the young hermits welcome and prepared their daughters with loving words of reassurance and advice. Kala was married to Marichi, Anasuya to Atri, Shraddha to Angiras, Havirbhu to Pulastya, Gati to Pulaha, Kriya to Kratu, Khyati to Brighu, Arundhati to Vashishta, and the youngest daughter, Shanti, to Atharva.

The sacred fire bore witness to their weddings, and each daughter was given a cloth bundle of hastily collected things to start domestic life with.

The newly-weds were duly seen off, with Kardama and Devahuti bravely holding back their tears.



Devahuti felt extremely lonely without her daughters and moped about the house for days. Her home felt bereft and empty. She rallied herself that the empty nest was in the natural order of things. However, she went about her household duties with a heavy heart, missing her children very much.

But a new and even more terrible blow was to fall. Not much longer after the girls had departed, leaving the little hermitage morosely silent, Kardama sat Devahuti down and told her his plans. ‘Devahuti, I told you about this before we were married. I have completed my duties as a householder now, and I must go away for good as a renunciate, a sanyasi. I am going far away and will never see you again.’

Devahuti’s long habit of uncomplaining cheerfulness broke at this thunderclap. She dissolved in angry tears. ‘I have spent my whole life devoted to you. And I am expecting our tenth child. How can you leave me like this?’

‘Devahuti, please understand. Your child will be a son; he will be Lord Narayana’s gift to you. I have no fears for his future.’

After a pause, Devahuti said sadly, 'I love you. You are the sum and substance of my life. How unlucky am I that I have been deceived by the Lord's maya. I am afraid of this world, afraid of losing you, afraid of what will happen. What should I do?'

'I love you too, but I must go. Pray to Lord Narayana. He will show you the way, don't be afraid,' said Kardama, and before she knew it, he was gone. Just like that, after years of a close, happy marriage and warm family life, Devahuti's husband vanished forever in pursuit of his own goals. Her girlish dreams of happiness, her womanly yearnings, counted as nothing.



Kardama went miles away, deep into the forest. Embraced by the woods, he felt cut off from all attachment. His mind, body and spirit seemed to fuse gradually into a harmony of being that was powerfully unlike anything he had felt before. Sitting in yogic silence, in love with his breath – which he controlled more and more – his days slid by like an uninterrupted dream in which he thought only of God. One golden morning, in this state of transcendent calm, his breath stopped, and he felt his spirit disappear into the light that was the Lord.



Devahuti, meanwhile, struggled alone at home, awaiting the birth of her child, helped by an attendant that her grieving mother, Shatarupa, sent her. Eventually, a beautiful boy was born to Devahuti, whom she named Kapila. Lost in thoughts of Kardama, she looked after her son with the automatic knack of years of motherhood, but her heart was not in it. Occasionally, she caught her son in her arms and wept over his soft curls, remembering Kardama and her daughters.

A new period of loneliness commenced when Kapila was old enough to be sent to gurukul, to a preceptor some distance away. After that, Devahuti sent her attendant back to Shatarupa for she wanted to brood alone.

She took Kardama's parting words to heart and determinedly prayed to Lord Narayana as she went about her daily tasks, fetching wood and water, gathering fruit, nuts and herbs, cooking her simple meals. She fell asleep exhausted every night, having kept herself busy the whole day in an effort to pass time meaningfully. Her heart felt broken and her mind was never calm, for her disturbed thoughts of loss and her fears about the future did not let her enjoy any peace despite her prayers and fasts.

But one day, Kapila came back home.

'Are your studies completed, my son?' asked Devahuti, after blessing him in welcome.

'Yes, dear Mother, I am home now.' Kapila smiled, holding her hand.

Devahuti flew to her household tasks with her old spring,

humming happily as she did everything she could to make Kapila comfortable. She cooked his favourite gruel of boiled millet flavoured with wild ginger, wild turmeric and tender greens. How tall he had grown, how very much he resembled both his father and her. She could not take her eyes off him. That day, she prayed to Lord Narayana in blissful gratitude and slept peacefully.

But the very next morning, her old anxieties began to devour her again. 'I am afraid of losing him next,' she warned herself, but the worry ate her up all the same. Seeing her unhappy face, Kapila asked her what troubled her.

His anxious face was a jolt to Devahuti. She fetched a small pot of water and drank a little to steady herself. 'It is time I faced up to the reality of existence but I still don't know how,' she told herself. 'My husband told me that Lord Narayana would help me fight my fears. Here is my son, radiant with good thoughts and deep learning. He is the Almighty's gift to me. Perhaps Lord Narayana will speak to me through him.'

Some of her old determination came back and she turned her anxious face to look at Kapila. She said, 'My dear son, I need your help. I have always been clear in my choices. But my attachment to you all has turned into a thorn in my heart. I am miserable about losing your father and your sisters. And now I am afraid to lose you. Set me free from this terrible anxiety, my son. How may I be at peace and break these bonds like your father set out to do? I am unused to going alone into the deep forest. I need to learn to be at peace here, at home. Please won't you tell me how?'

‘Mother, I noticed that you keep busy all day long. The house and garden are spotless. The puja flowers grow in profusion ... the malli, the bakula, the champaka, the arali, beloved of Shiva, the tulsi we offer Lord Narayana. The grain jars are full, and there is a good store of freshly husked paddy. This shelf is loaded with pots of all the pickles, chutneys and preserves you have made ... wild berry, lemon, mango, brinjal and pumpkin. You are tireless in body, yet your soul is crushed, Mother.’

‘Of what use is my life, son, without my husband?’

‘Mother, it’s not like that! You chose your life; you have been happy. Nothing lasts forever, Mother. It is the nature of human life.’

‘I have never complained until the day your father went away. And then, I was so overwhelmed by my loss that I was embarrassed to ask for help. Nor did I know whom to ask. But now I feel there is no shame in asking someone of good mind who has studied these things. You have learnt Brahma Vidya, the knowledge of existence, have you not? Now please impart it to me, my son.’

Kapila smiled at his mother with affection and respect.

‘Mother, I will gladly tell you. It is so easy that anyone can understand. It is the mind, Mother, that is the cause of both bondage and freedom. Experience is made of three gunas, or qualities, of peace, involvement and negativity. They are called sattva, rajas and tamas. When the balance of these gunas is disturbed, emotions take over and cause unhappiness. The mind turns away from its contemplative

inner self and is locked in a weary battle with every passing emotion. So far, the surest way out known to man is the remedial path of bhakti.'

'I have prayed and fasted so much, my son, but it has not helped me.'

'Mother, bhakti, or devotion, is a gradual process. The mind will not cooperate at first because the hold of the world is so strong. Think more and more of the Lord, Mother, until it takes over your mind and frees it from worldly attachments. Sanga is the state of attachment. Mukta Sanga is freedom from attachment. Attachment to God loosens the bonds of other attachments, slowly but surely.'

'How may I help that process, son?'

'Mother, read and listen to stories about God, hear and sing songs about God, be gentle to all you meet, which you are anyway, for the Lord loves kind words and deeds and a lack of anger and greed. We are basically afraid of Time, Mother, which gives and takes away from human life. But when we realize that God is Time, we find perspective. These gains and losses are inevitable and mean less and less when we make God our one true and constant friend.'

'It is cold comfort to me in my grief, son, but there seems to be no other way out,' said Devahuti.

Nevertheless, she thanked her son for his guidance and went to sit by the river to think his words over. As she knew instinctively that he would, Kapila, too, went away soon after. He travelled north-west where he found a peaceful forest to retire in. But his earthly mission was done. His teachings

to his mother, which she shared with all who came her way thereafter, and spread widely, came to be known as Sankhya philosophy. Meanwhile, Devahuti's daughters propagated the human race, and so Kardama became known as 'Kardama Prajapati', an ancestor of mankind.

Devahuti lived on alone at the hermitage that had been her home for so many years. She never stopped missing her family and struggled bravely to find the peace her son had described. She practised yoga, lived an even simpler life, prayed and meditated sincerely. She cried very often at first, but the weeping bouts reduced over time. 'Everything comes from Time, and Time is God, so why be disturbed?' she told herself repeatedly. As the years rolled by, Devahuti tried very hard to throw herself into endless activity to distract herself from the loss of everything she held dear.

Bit by bit, as Kapila had promised, she reached a stage of mental calm after some years where she felt neither glad nor sad. Instead, she felt a peace that seemed much better than the agitation of love and nowhere as chaotic as the loss by which she was tormented when Kardama went away. When it was time for her breath to cease, Devahuti went quietly to her refuge in the Lord, her mind as limpid as the waters of the holy Sarasvati.